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RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Written statement submitted by the North-South XXI, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[22 April 1998]

GE.98-12608 (E)

The plight of children in Sri Lanka

A. The impact of the "war for peace"

1. Children are regular victims of artillery shelling and aerial bombing of Tamil civilian areas in the North-Eastern Province (NEP). The attacks are unleashed by the armed forces indiscriminately, often blindly at night, to principally terrorize the civilian population. The child victims are either killed or maimed and/or orphaned. The attacks are the more recent variation, since the mid-1980s, of a sustained strategy of collective punishment directed against Tamil civilians irrespective of gender or age.

2. The attacks have intensified after June 1990. Twenty-five schoolchildren were killed on the spot and many more injured when Sri Lanka Air Force Pucara planes bombed the Nagarkoil Central School, in the Jaffna peninsula, in September 1995. Seven children under the age of 12, the youngest being 3 years of age, were massacred in Kumarapuram in February 1996 by the armed forces. Amnesty International confirmed that three teenagers were deliberately shot at close range by police and home guards in Thampalakamam in February 1998. In a particularly harrowing incident of military sadism which took place in Kiran, Batticaloa, in late March 1998, a six-year-old girl, Peethamparam Sasikala, was ordered to run and then shot in the back by security personnel.

3. The psychological impact is not immediately obvious but nonetheless far-reaching.

B. The impact of the embargo imposed on supplies of food by the Sri Lankan Government

4. The Government imposed the embargo of food supplies to the NEP between 1985 and July 1987. During this period the Government disingenuously claimed that the embargo was aimed at starving out the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and that supplies of food essential to meet the needs of Tamil civilians was being allowed through. However, the international community was not convinced then and the Sri Lankan Government was condemned for implementing a policy of genocide against the Tamil people.

5. The Government reimposed the same food embargo, while offering the same unconvincing rationalization, in June 1990, and has maintained the embargo up to now without interruption. The embargo includes restrictions on the supply of food for infants and nutritional food supplements for children.

6. Starvation is common and malnutrition among children is rampant. In the Mullaitivu District, out of a random sample of 16,767 children under 5, those who were normal were only 4,863; 6,371 children were found to be afflicted with third degree malnutrition, 3,186 children with second degree and 2,347 with first degree malnutrition. Children have developed night blindness and students are so weak that schools are forced to close by 10 a.m. because the students cannot cope with schooling without food. The impact of malnutrition will persist as the affected children grow up into underdeveloped adults - mothers and fathers.

C. The impact of the embargo imposed on supplies of essential medicines by the Sri Lankan Government

7. Existing health services are grossly insufficient. In the Mullaitivu District, for example, there are 11 midwives and one public health inspector (PHI) for a population of over 200,000. According to the specifications of the Ministry of Health, there should be one midwife for every 2,500 people, but there is one midwife for about 19,000 people. The Ministry also specified that there should be one PHI for every 8,000 people.

8. Children weakened by malnutrition fall easy prey to malaria, typhoid and scabies. There is an acute shortage of medicines needed to treat these diseases. The shortage is due to restricted supplies; and it is aggravated by the Government supplying drugs close to or past their expiry date. Rabies is a major threat. The Government banned the supply of Stichneeds necessary to put down stray dogs. After considerable pressure the Government has authorized a trickle of 200 grammes of Stichneeds. The supply of antibiotics is systematically restricted, which severely limits the possibility for treating common infections among children.

9. Consequently, infant mortality has risen sharply. As in the case of the embargo on food supplies, here too the Government dishonestly claims that the supply of medicines is being restricted to deny access to them by the LTTE. However, the combined effect of deliberately depriving children of medicine and food has genocidal consequences.

D. The impact of the damage and destruction caused to the educational infrastructure by the Sri Lankan Government

10. Artillery shelling and aerial bombing has destroyed about 20 per cent of the schools. The armed forces occupy many of the remaining schools. As a result, thousands of Tamil children do not have access to minimum educational facilities. The children who live in refugee camps or who are orphaned are particularly affected.

11. Educational facilities, where available, are woefully inadequate. There is an acute shortage of teachers, textbooks, furniture and equipment. In the Thunukkai Division of the Mullaitivu District, for instance, the present facilities were barely able to cope with about 2,300 students before the population was displaced in 1995, now they have to serve 8,571 children. Students study under trees. The schools need 313 teachers but have only 128. So the department is forced to employ 106 volunteer teachers, each paid an allowance of 500 SL Rs per month which is collected from the displaced population at the rate of 10 Rs per person per month. According to the Ministry of Education about 120,000 children are without access to any educational facilities.

12. Non-governmental organization officials working on the ground estimate the number of children who are denied education to be much higher. For instance, it is estimated that some 14,000 children between year 2 and 5 in the Jaffna peninsula are not being sent to school because parents fear for their safety.

13. Consequently, the education of the vast majority of Tamil children has been massively disrupted, as evidenced by their declining performance at examinations. Despite the dismantling of its administration in the Jaffna peninsula, the LTTE has, within its limited resources, continued to discharge its social responsibilities. The organization has provided educational facilities for female and male children who have lost their parents in the war, at Chencholai and Kantharuban Arivuchcholai children's homes, respectively.

E. The sexual abuse of children

14. At the checkpoints manned by the Sri Lankan armed forces in the NEP children have been arbitrarily arrested and many of them have disappeared. Arrested girl-children have been gang-raped by the Sri Lankan security forces. The gang-rape of Krishanthy Kumaraswamy in September 1996 is well known. She was arrested at the Chemmanai checkpoint on her way back from school, raped and murdered. Another case in point is the rape of Thenuka Selvaraja, a 10-year-old child.

15. Rape is routinely used as a weapon of war by the Sri Lankan security forces against Tamil females - both children and women - to systematically terrorize and dehumanize them. Tamil children in refugee camps, which are virtual concentration camps, are most vulnerable to sexual abuse, particularly at the hands of the Sri Lankan security personnel who run the camps.

16. The Sri Lankan Government has turned a blind eye to the sexual exploitation of Sinhalese children in the South by sex tourists. Some concern is being expressed in official circles about the activity of paedophiles. However, it is a token gesture. The Government has for many years been aware of the sexual exploitation of children, but it has continued to sacrifice the Sinhalese children to earn hard currency, which is desperately needed to finance the war against the Tamil people - including Tamil children.

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